

Sullivan retires after a lifetime of service

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HUNTINGTON -- Ruth Christ Sullivan's life changed forever when her fifth child, Joseph, stopped talking. He was 18 months old and able to quickly complete complex puzzles meant for his older siblings, but he wouldn't speak.

As a public health nurse and mother of four other children, Sullivan knew something wasn't right. But it took years, and a lot of persistence, to figure out what was wrong.

In 1962, a physician told her Joseph would always be a little "odd" and used the word "autism" for the first time.

"He handed me one article about it. We had a very short visit," Sullivan said.

But she set about finding out everything she could about autism.

Years later, when the Sullivan family settled in Huntington, she found one of the nation's only classrooms for autistic children.

From her kitchen table, she founded the Autism Service Center in Huntington, one of the largest organizations in the country designed to offer lifetime services to people with autism and other developmental disabilities.

Today, Sullivan will retire as executive director, leaving behind a legacy that includes more than 40 years of advocacy work. The center now has 280 clients, including her son Joseph, 13 group homes and a waiting list for all of its services.

In her lifelong quest to make a better life for her son, now 47, she has improved the lives of countless others.

Mike Grady, her successor, said it is Sullivan's curiosity that has made her an outstanding administrator and advocate.

"She finds interest in just about everything. All people are interesting to her, and there are very few things she doesn't want to know about. When you have a life of curiosity, that's fuel for your whole life and she has fuel," Grady said.

Sullivan, 83, says she was simply "doing what needed to be done" for her son, and others.

In a news release, Craig Curtis, president of the West Virginia Behavioral Healthcare Providers Association, said Sullivan is recognized far beyond West Virginia for her work.

"She is an international leader in her field, and we have been fortunate to have had her working in West Virginia," he said.

Sullivan also was instrumental in organizing the Autism Training Center at Marshall University. She has written dozens of articles on autism and contributed to many books on the subject.

She acted as a consultant to the 1988 film "Rain Man," and Dustin Hoffman's character in that movie was based largely on her son. Hoffman and the film's director, Barry Levinson, came to Huntington for the film's world premiere.

"They were wonderful to work with," Sullivan said, and the film succeeded in treating the autistic character with dignity.

Sullivan was the first elected president of the group now known as the Autism Society of America and has served on countless local, state and national boards, task forces and commissions. She earned degrees in public health nursing and public health administration before earning a doctorate in psychology, speech and hearing science and special education from Ohio University in 1984.

By the time she earned her doctorate degree, she and her husband, Bill, were the parents of seven children. Was it a lot of work? Of course, she said, but, again, it "simply had to be done."

"She is extraordinary. She has so much energy," Grady said. "We will miss her, but this organization is staffed with the best people. We know what the job is, and we will always do a job that will make Ruth proud."

Sullivan will remain on the board of directors and as a consultant.

But her first job after retirement seems mundane when stacked against her professional accomplishments.

"Really, I'm going to clean some closets," she said. "After that, my book is in my head."